

TONBRIDGE & MALLING BOROUGH COUNCIL
COMMUNITIES and HOUSING ADVISORY BOARD

09 November 2021

Report of the Director of Street Scene, Leisure & Technical Services

Part 1- Public

Matters for Recommendation to Cabinet - Non-Key Decision (Decision may be taken by the Cabinet Member)

1 ROADSIDE NATURE RESERVES

Summary

This report presents the outcome of the recent ‘Roadside Nature Reserve’ (RNR) trial and proposes a future approach for Member consideration that could be adopted at other sites across the borough.

1.1 Background

1.1.1 At the meeting of the Street Scene and Environment Advisory Board on the 9 February 2021, Members considered and approved the following recommendations:

- 1) the proposed trial of a wildflower strip on amenity open space at Darenth Avenue be progressed.
- 2) liaison be undertaken with the Medway Valley Countryside Partnership and the Council’s grounds maintenance contractor with a full report being considered at a future meeting of this Board on the potential of wider borough proposals.

1.1.2 A number of Members had raised the potential of introducing wildflower strips on amenity open space and/or allowing the grass to grow longer by reducing the frequency of cuts. The decision was taken to allow the grass to grow longer rather than creating a wildflower strip due to the financial costs that would be incurred.

1.1.3 A suitable location was identified in Darenth Avenue, Tonbridge and the trial consisted of cutting the area twice, once in March and once in September/October and cutting the edges against the road and path 15 times as per the current contract. It was previously reported that the grass would be ‘cut and mulched’ though during early consultation with the Medway Valley Countryside Partnership, it was clear that a cut and collect method would need to be applied to the late (September/October) cut in order to achieve greater opportunities for biodiversity.

1.2 Report Findings

- 1.2.1 Medway Valley Countryside Partnership undertook periodic monitoring of the site throughout the trial and their full report can be found in **Annex 1**. Key findings of the report include –
- The initial site survey in March 2021 revealed only 6 plant species, all typical of amenity grassland sites.
 - At the second site visit in June the number of plant species observed had increased to 15 species, but owing to the very late and cold spring, followed by heavy rainfall in May 2021 it was hardly a typical growing season.
 - The site visit in August showed a further increase in floral diversity to 24 species, with good patches of black medic, black knapweed, clovers, and goat's beard – all good food sources for pollinating insects. This increase in floral diversity was matched by an increase and abundance in insects with 6 butterfly species seen. There were few bumblebees, however, most likely owing to their lack of nesting sites in the immediate vicinity. There were no Orthoptera seen (the order of insects including grasshoppers and crickets). This is not surprising, however, as the close mown grass of previous years would not have allowed such species to complete their lifecycle, a period of at least two years of changed management being required before this group are able to naturally migrate to the site.
- 1.2.2 In summary, the report concluded that the newly adopted management/cutting regime may require at least two growing seasons to fully determine the extent of the benefits. Initial recordings do, however, demonstrate clear increases in biodiversity even over one growing season and the benefits of adopting the altered maintenance regime.
- 1.2.3 The report also contained a number of recommendations that included the sowing of Yellow Rattle and future monitoring. With regard to the latter, further monitoring is not considered essential spend at the current time and is, therefore, not proposed. With regard to the sowing of Yellow Rattle, this is at relatively low one-off cost (£125) and could be carried out at the trial site within existing revenue budgets.
- 1.2.4 Medway Valley Countryside Partnerships final recommendation is to *'Follow leading wildlife charity Plantlife's recommendations which advocate local provenance seedbank to grow with the only other intervention being to cut and collect. This will be the most sustainable, economic, and successful method to provide a more biodiverse site which captures carbon dioxide and nitrogen'*.

1.3 Future RNR Proposals

- 1.3.1 Taking the above into account it is, therefore, proposed for Member consideration that there would be benefits to adopting the same management approach to other

sites within the borough. These sites would follow the same cutting regime being cut once in late March with a second 'cut and collect' in late September/October; the edges against paths or roadsides would still be cut 15 times as per the current grounds maintenance contract.

- 1.3.2 It is proposed that Officers now bring forward sites for future RNR's for Members consideration and approval. It is proposed that sites are identified in order that the new cutting regime can be adopted in the 2022 growing season.

1.4 Legal Implications

- 1.4.1 None

1.5 Financial and Value for Money Considerations

- 1.5.1 On a small scale, it is anticipated that no additional costs would be incurred regarding changing the cutting regime from 15 cuts a year to one cut in March and a cut and collect in September/October.
- 1.5.2 Should Members agree to the one-off sowing of Yellow Rattle at the trial plot, this could be carried out within existing revenue budgets at an estimated cost of £125.

1.6 Risk Assessment

- 1.6.1 None

1.7 Equality Impact Assessment

- 1.7.1 The decision recommended through this paper have a remote or low relevance to the substance of the Equality Act. There is no perceived impact on end users.

1.8 Policy Considerations

- 1.8.1 Asset Management, Biodiversity & Sustainability, Climate Change and Community

1.9 Recommendations

- 1.9.1 It is **RECOMMENDED** to Cabinet that:

- 1) the Medway Valley Countryside Partnership report be noted;
- 2) the cutting regime trialled and outlined in the report at 1.3.1 be adopted at other sites across the borough; and
- 3) future sites be identified for Member's approval and implementation in the 2022 growing season.

The Director of Street Scene, Leisure & Technical Services confirms that the proposals contained in the recommendation(s), if approved, will fall within the Council's Budget and Policy Framework.

Background papers:

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Nil

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